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The Second Round

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's October visit to the United States did not arouse much public interest in India. There were no major issues at stake, no burning conflicts to resolve; it was business as usual.

It does appear that with the memories of the various scandals and political upheavals behind him, and no major elections in the offing, the public has little interest in what the Prime Minister says or does. After all, the average citizen has enough distractions and problems to occupy him, what with the drought and rising prices, the civil war in Jaffna and the Reliance Cup.

After almost three years in office, Rajiv Gandhi has established his hold over the prime ministership. He has survived all the onslaughts of the opposition and learnt that you can get away with anything so long as you don't bother the mass of people too often or too much. He is assured of his term in office and probably as many more as he may seek; after all, people want continuity and a name and a face they are familiar with.

The truth is that whoever is in power in Delhi does not really make much difference to the common man. He or she must continue to struggle for existence, strive for survival. If there is any progress it is thanks to the initiative of local entrepreneurs and private social organizations; the government at best only perpetuates the status quo.

Gandhi has matured in office. He has learnt that in Washington he must speak of India continuing its policy of economic liberalization and in Moscow he must talk of India's commitment to socialism. In India he must attack big business and blame the foreign hand for destabilizing the country. He has learnt that from Washington he must not fly directly to Moscow as that weakens his position in both countries. He must wait and then visit the Russians.

Rajiv Gandhi has also learnt how to deal with his critics: a raid here, a CBI interrogation there, a few stone-throwing incidents and a few physical assaults by party enthusiasts keep those opposed to him in check. But most importantly the young Prime Minister has learnt that there is no morality in public life. He has come to terms with the reality of Indian politics and, like his predecessor, he is now secure in the trappings of his office.

A Murder Most Foul

Kamila Tyabji

Apparently to lakhs of our countrymen a woman's life is worth nothing once her husband is dead.

The appalling happenings in Rajasthan recently, the indifference of the state government and the complete apathy of the forces which control law and order leave one almost bereft of hope for this country's future. What are we heading for?

There are at least three immense areas of concern:

First, the urgent question arises: what is the purpose of a woman's existence in India? Here we are, making efforts to educate women, to enable them to earn, to help them to stand on their own feet so that they may be able to face all adversities in life – and suddenly we are dealt this stunning blow. Apparently to lakhs of our countrymen a woman's life is worth nothing once her husband has died – even if, as in this case, she has only been with that husband for a total of 12 days, and even if she is only 18 years old with all her life before her! And not only is this what numbers of people believe, but there is no prompt action from our government though the crime that is being committed has been outlawed by the Statute book for nearly 150 years.

More: the event is glorified and the Chunri Mahotsov sanctified by the presence of numerous MLAs and party leaders, not to mention countless others normally considered the leaders of public opinion. Why, the father-in-law himself is a teacher!

We have a constitution in this country which has laid immense emphasis on equality between men and women. We have adopted laws, including UN conventions, which have declared discrimination between men and women an offence. We have bent over backwards in devising ways which would (in theory) lessen the educational gap between men and women. But when it comes to the most important issue – that of life itself – a woman's life apparently reaches its highest peak when she immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre!

Would it equally add glory to a man's soul, one wonders, if *he* showed such an all-pervading love – and how is it that Rajasthani folk-lore, so full of martial valour, has found no instances to extol such courage?

Secondly, as citizens, it seems we just have to stand by helplessly whilst the government abdicates all responsibility for law and order. Perhaps this is largely our own fault: we *have* stood by and watched, for far too long – whilst riots of all kinds have erupted and nothing has been done about it.

Communal riots, which in 1968 in Ahmedabad aroused the conscience of the whole of India, have now become commonplace. The Shiv Sena held all of Bombay to ransom on several occasions, and the government and the police just looked the other way. Delhi burned after Indira Gandhi's assassination, and the authorities did nothing – even though the very names of many of the guilty people were known. Massacres are reported from all over the country, but it seems that we cannot even be stirred to hold an inquiry these days. Terrorism is an everyday occurence.

In short, it seems that Indians have no feelings and no conscience left. How then can we expect the Rajasthan government to have interfered and to have stopped the tragedy of Roop Kanwar?

Yet it is not just that we are a backward people, and that change will take a long time. We seem to have entered a period of rapid decline. Only a few months ago, in April this year, a crowd of 20,000 was dispersed by the Rajasthani police and a sati prevented. Earlier, in March 1985, five rounds were fired in the air by the police which sufficed to disperse another large crowd. And in 1981, in Jabalpur, just four brave villagers were enough to quell a crowd and pull a 65-year-old woman off the funeral pyre. And yet the present Home Minister of Rajasthan pleads (even after the High Court had put a ban in the event) that "the Chunri Mahotsov could have been stopped only by bullets." As though the use of bullets was something unheard of when a crime has to be prevented!

'Which brings me to the third area of grave concern. For if we are interested in the social and cultural welfare of this nation, we have to look beyond the implications of this horrible and public murder: look deeper into the illegal and terrible nexus of money power, corruption, and religious rituals, which is strangling the development and advancement of our people.

We have seen this stranglehold increasing in all sorts of ways: in the way elections are rigged, and local elections bypassed; the way communal feelings are incited; the way, above all, in which fundamentalism of all kinds is insidiously cultivated. The support by the government of the Muslim Women's Bill was a glaring example of how votes and money power were allowed to override all principles and desires for 'modernity' and the 21st century.

The encouragement in all sorts of subtle and not so subtle ways to make more and more of rituals and superstitions has brought us a long way from the days when Pandit Nehru preached the glorious secular basis of a free India. Just as his own wish to be buried without ritual was ignored by his daughter, so are all his other dreams of the 'scientific temper' being trampled upon today.

We are asked to believe that it was because Roop Kanwar was buoyed up by a deep religious sense, by a conviction that what she was doing would not only save her immortal soul but would bring merit to seven generations of her dead husband's family – it was because of these 'noble' factors that her immolation was allowed and encouraged. But, in an age when we hear more and more of bride burning and dowry deaths, often enough for some pitiably small sum of money, is it not only too obvious how large a part the 'offerings' made by the public at the site of the sati must play in the acquiescence of relatives?

And what will be the future effect, when a memorial is erected to the Sati-Mata, providing a perennial source of income to the family? Will the Rajasthan government do anything to prevent such a memorial being put up – which will become a direct and ever-increasing incitement to future crimes and murders?

And why will this mania stop at sati? Already we have heard of the sacrificing of children. What about other kinds of despair – as for example when a mother suddenly loses her child? All of us, when we see someone we care about so unhappy that life does not seem worthwhile, use all our efforts to help that person over such momentary despair. Yet, when it comes to sati, not only relatives but the entire public goad her on to the last extremity!

The responsibility of the government, both at the state and central levels, is overwhelming and direct. Every person who was involved, directly, or indirectly, or even by their mere presence and encouragement at the sati, is clearly guilty under the law of the land.

If the government fails to act, and especially if it condones the creation of a memorial, it is itself guilty of breaking the law. What does it propose to do? And how much are we, as concerned citizens of this country, prepared to endure? This question confronts us all.

The author is Founder and Chairman of *Women's India Trust*, an organisation working for the economic advancement of women.

Ranchod will immolate himself on his wife's funeral pyre

Dina Mehta

If you can instigate the widow, you can inveigle the widower.

The scene for this skit is the verandah of a village home somewhere in Rajasthan. It is played by four characters:

Khimjee – an old relative
Bharat – elder brother of Ranchod
Pratap – younger brother of Ranchod
Sita—their sister

Khimjee: He is mad. Go back to his room and talk to him, Bharat.

Bharat: He won't listen.

Khimjee: You are his elder brother. We respect traditions in this family. He will listen to you.

Bharat: Her sudden death has stunned him. They had been married for 12 years. She gave him seven sons. He says he cannot live without her.

Pratap: I never heard such nonsense in my life! What's wrong with Ranchod? He fought the land like a hero for every grain of corn he grew, and now he behaves like a woman!

Bharat: She made his life a song, he says, from dawn to dusk, and from dusk to dawn. When he fell from the loft she nursed him for months, till he could walk again.

Pratap: So? She was his woman!

Bharat: Sick as she was yesterday, she went out to collect firewood, then cooked a meal and fed the boys –

Khimjee: Oh, if it is the children Ranchod is worried about... Tell him I have a niece in Udaipur who is now husband high. Her parents are looking for a good match for their only child. But they are poor and cannot afford much by way of dowry. A little persuasion from me – and Ranchod can wed her three months from today and the children will have a new mother to look to their needs. Reshma is a good girl. A fair, sturdy wench.

Pratap: Then how is it you never talked about this Reshma before?

Khimjee: There is a time for everything, as you should know.

Pratap: The time to talk about a woman is when she is ripe for the picking.

Bharat: When there is trouble in the family it's time for the younger brother to hold his tongue!

Pratap: So while I hold my tongue will the elder brother manage to talk Ranchod into reason? I doubt it. All morning you've argued with him, but Ranchod has decided to immolate himself on his wife's funeral pyre! He's insane. When the cage is now open for him to fly again, he chooses death! Such conduct is becoming for a destitute widow seeking the comforts of heaven –

Bharat: I'm not so sure. It's contrary to the sacred texts, Sita once told me, and her book knowledge is more than ours. Also the law of the land is against it.

Khimjee: But the law looks the other way when it happens, I know. These old eyes saw once, in their youth, the horror of the sacrifice, made more ghastly by the struggles of the victim. These ears have heard screams which could not be deadened by the roll of drums. And the smell of burning flesh still lingers –

Bharat: Stop, for God's sake. I've sent word to our uncle and cousins in Saki to come at once to prevent this – this doom my brother is inviting on his head. I've summoned the temple priest... I don't know what delays him... but now I must go to inform the police.

Pratap: Why drag cousins and police and *pujaris* into this? Can we not stop him ourselves?

Khimjee: We must get the children to plead with him. Their innocent tears will surely melt his resolve.

Bharat: I'm waiting, also, for Sita to arrive. Our sister always had a way with him, and Ranchod will listen to her.

Pratap: I don't care if Sita comes or not. And never mind the children. (*yelling*) I'll stop this nonsense if I have to hit him on the head, break his one good leg, tie him to the doorpost for a week!

Sita: (*entering*) Lower your voice, Pratap. Death took place in this house only a few hours ago and there must be respect for the dead.

Bharat: God knows I'm glad you are here, Sita. Have you spoken to Ranchod?

Sita: No. I merely sat beside him a few quiet moments as he keeps his sorrowing vigil over her body.

Khimjee: But you know, Sita*behn*, what he intends to do?

Sita: Such news travels fast. I know. People have already started gathering down the road almost up to our gate – for a free entertainment not to be missed.

Pratap: I knew it! He wants to make us the laughing stock of the whole village. Our family will be the target for arrows of mirth from all over Rajasthan! From all corners of the country – for generations to come!

Sita: Oh? (*pause*) I gather then that you want me to persuade Ranchod *against* this supreme sacrifice?

Pratap: (*shouting*) Of course, I do. It is a disgrace for a man!

Bharat: (*fervently*) We do, Sita, we do. Only you can prevent this ugly crime.

Sita: Crime? You talk of crime! For shame. When a grief-stricken widow is ready to fling herself on her husband's funeral pyre, do we protest against such a resolve as a crime? Oh no. Why, even at the last moment if she wishes to draw back from the cruel flames, her guard of honour sees to it that her steps do not falter; and long hooked goads are used to thrust her back on the burning bed if she seeks an escape... So let us have equality between men and women, as granted by our constitution!

Pratap: What – what is she trying to say?

Sita: Let Ranchod go the fiery way he has so valorously chosen. Let us extol such courage instead of talking of crime. Let us rejoice that our brother will gain immortality – and bring merit to seven generations of his seven sons!

Pratap: She is talking nonsense. But she means it! She's really going to allow our brother to burn!

Sita: Why not? If you can instigate a widow, you can inveigle a widower.

Pratap: You are a monster!

Sita: (*sighing*) You are not thinking clearly, Pratap. Think! After Ranchod is a cooked corpse, a festival will be held, glorifying the deed. It will be attended by bigwigs and VIPs, by legislators and religious preceptors – such a boost to our village! One of the MLAs may even notice the shortage of drinking water here – and be moved to do something about it at last.

Bharat: I cannot *believe* this is my sister talking.

Sita: And the pious will be moved to erect a temple at the immolation site to Sato-Dada Ranchod, which will put our village on the tourist map! Thousands of pilgrims will turn up every year to pay their respects – *and* with other offerings which will go to swell our family coffers.

Khimjee: May I remind you, Sita*behn*, that Ranchod's youngest son is only two? To be an orphan at two, have you thought of that?

Sita: Ah yes, the children. Perhaps one of my nephews can, in time, be persuaded to take up self-immolation on the pyre as a hereditary profession? To keep the profits in the family, you understand. Certainly his appropriation of the woman's role would be an encroachment on what has been her traditional preserve – but at the threshold of the twenty-first century, we must be modern enough not to think in sexist terms. You agree?

Bharat: What you suggest is barbarous! I thought you were a teacher!

Sita : (*drawing herself up*) I am. For the last 17 years. So let me tell you there's a saying in English that what's sauce for the goose is also sauce for the gander. And while you try to figure that out, I go to prepare Ranchod for immortality – don't worry, I have a little opium tucked away in this sari fold to benumb his senses before the ordeal. And Pratap you may begin the chant, '*Victory to Sato-Dada Ranchod*' – you have the loudest voice. Soon the drums will take up the rhythm and you'll find hundreds of throats echoing that hungry cry.

A Nation Gets the Administration It Deserves – V

B.B. Paymaster

The crisis of character has to be solved first.

At a workshop held recently at the Administrative Staff College of India at Hyderabad, attended by both political executives and public administrators, it was concluded that in order to improve the public image of both wings of the administration, it was necessary to get results; and in the background of rapid technological change, the administration would have to acquire modern management concepts to ensure speedy management of the economy and development of the nation. Both political executives and public administrators would have to work as members of a cohesive team, and work with the public good as their main concern.

In this context it is good to note that the Government has improved the pay scales of the bureaucracy at all levels. Decentralisation of the decision-making process may also help to make the administration more effective. But the political executives will have to learn to respect the independence and integrity of the bureaucracy; which will certainly help to improve its motivation.

The Government is also to be commended for laying stress upon the enforcement of accountability, simplifiction of rules and procedures, prompt and courteous service to the public, and the setting up of effective machinery for the redressal of public grievances.

The provision of administrative tools will also help but cannot by itself suffice to ensure efficient administration. I refer to the proposal to install large numbers of computers at the Centre and at the State secretariats, as well as a computer in each Collectorate.

Finally, my personal feeling is that the five-day week was a grave mistake, and the actual result is less work. Officials may be made to work longer hours but the total actual work done in the longer hours during each day tends to remain the same as before. We need more discipline and harder work in a poor country like ours, but gone are the days of *aaram haram hai*.

It is not that I wish to belittle our solid achievements during the forty years since the attainment of our Independence. I believe that our country has a great future, but our rate of progress will depend upon the degree to which we can correct, and the time within which we can correct, the grave administrative failures listed by me in this series.

I appreciate the efforts that the present Government is making to alleviate poverty through various anti-poverty programmes. But the implementation of these programmes, too, depends upon the human material available for the purpose. A recent review highlights two specific failings of the programme : (i) There was wrong identification of the beneficiaries, to the extent of 15 to 20 percent at an all-India level, though this was as high as 70 percent in some States; and (ii) The selection of activities was done without considering the abilities of the beneficiaries, differences in infrastructural support, backward and forward linkages, etc., with the result that the activities did not prove viable, and the money was wasted.

And now to recapitulate what has been said: The absence of law and order and the resort to violence has assumed alarming proportions. This is a problem that must be tackled.

Also, much thought and energy are

being devoted to reforming the bureaucratic administration. But who is going to reform the political branch, and how?

Then there is something seriously wrong with our planning process. First things do not come first. We must also remember that all governmental policies have to be implemented by the bureaucratic administration, which has necessarily to work through the human machinery available, and the quality and character of this human material is crucial.

Corruption is increasing rapidly, and our moral and spiritual values and code of public conduct are deteriorating at a progressive rate. Unless the decline can be halted, it is not realistic to prophesy a rosy future for us in the 21st century.

We have first to deserve and then desire. And in the long run we shall get the administrative system... and everything else... that we deserve. The situation cannot be retrieved merely by administrative reforms. The crisis of character has to be solved first.

Unless our increase in population is halted within a reasonable time, it will swallow up all our other gains. Our future depends upon whether we can do this, and whether we can eradicate corruption.

A government exists to govern, and an administration to administer. They have to produce results, and we have already had 40 years to do so. And the people may not wait much longer. (*concluded*)

Honeymoon with a difference

Homayun Taba

The invitation to take part in a seminar helped us both.

It is true that some people have not had a honeymoon. I am one of them. However, it is also true that at times one is lucky enough to make up for this lapse. I was provided with such an opportunity and grabbed it with both hands.

The last three months had been traumatic. My wife underwent major surgery and was left with a harakiri cut extending from one end of the lower abdomen to the other. Besides the physical pain and exhaustion there were psychological implications, insecurities and anxieties to be dealt with, and a sudden realisation of one's limitations. Too much for one soul to carry, so the need for care and assurance had increased greatly.

It was a new situation for me too, to think positively and maintain health so that I could provide the support she needed. The invitation to take part in a seminar helped us both. It was organised by a unique association called the Indian Society for Individual and Social Development – comprising professionals from various fields who were dedicated to a qualitative transformation of attitudes in one's social environment. To the achievement of this goal they brought a sense of caring I had not encountered in a long time.

The locale was a hotel at Bogmalo in Goa, set against a semi-circular beach with white waves lashing against a stretch of clear sandy shore. In the next five days we absorbed as much fresh air and scenic beauty as we could, and experienced the excellent service and hospitality of the hotel staff.

The opening session of the seminar perturbed several members. Most of the participants had come from large industrial organisations and for them such paraphernalia as an agenda, cyclostyled notes, etc. were a must. Well,none were provided here. Some felt cheated, and many judged the worth of the seminar too quickly – a disease we all suffer from and suffer badly.

The twenty-five participants were now divided into two groups and began to meet from morning till evening. We were encouraged to delve into ourselves and come out with whatever we felt. This seemingly boring endeavour gradually began to reveal subtle nuances. The language one used and certain words betraying hidden feelings: facilitators were quick to pinpoint these and hence provided another chance to go deeper. Hours passed and people slowly opened up. Several masks fell, too. No matter what walk of life one came from, there were unbelievable commonalities – the child in everyone wanted release and recognition, all wanted to be loved, and jealousies and arrogance surfaced.

On the last day both the groups merged for a longer session. The division into groups or artificial creation of boundaries had proved to be revealing. And the bringing down of barriers made one man experience a fear of dying similar to that which is supposed to happen to fishes that have lived in a river and are now about to enter the salty sea. Although the participants had talked freely in their respective groups, in the joint session an air of silence hung over the room. Then a surprising thing happened – the same man who had expressed his apprehensions began to speak. He was applauded for his initiative and for the fact that he had taken cognisance of his fear and had decided to do something about it: a positive and conscious change indeed.

The day after the conclusion of the seminar, we were taken on a tour of the city. While coming out of a shopping centre my wife tripped and fell, injuring her left foot. She had to be carried to the bus and the pain grew. Back in Bombay the X-ray revealed a hairline fracture.

She is now somewhat immobilised with her foot in a plaster cast. And the words of the head waiter at the restaurant of the Bogmalo hotel on seeing this limping lady, come to our minds: "This is Goa's way of making sure that you won't forget her."

So it ended up being a unique kind of honeymoon in which the couple did not just stare into each other's eyes, but interacted with people to explore the deeper layers of the mind.

The Devil's Messengers

Arun Bhatia

I was warned that when the owl hooted from your rooftop you were marked for death.

A recent news item has it that in the Cochin harbour, severe rat infestation and the consequent surfeit of snakes is being tackled by mongooses, the natural enemy. The mongooses' effort will be supplemented by barn owls, also introduced in the infested area, as both these creatures feed on rats. The idea is that the snakes will have competitors for their food supply, and their numbers will dwindle.

This sort of biological control is much more sensible than the use of pesticides and chemicals. It is cheaper, more effective, and drives home the fact that Mother Nature has devised a web of life, with her own checks and balances; and that certain myths that have gained currency about creatures of the wild need a second look.

Owls, for instance, pressed into service in Cochin, are inauspicious as we all "know." Everyone "knows" they give out a ghostly, dismal *hoo hoo* sound that falls on your ears from no particular direction. A *khansama* at an isolated dak bungalow on the Belgaum-Goa border in the 'sixties had warned me not to spend the night there. An owl was sitting atop the roof going *hoo hoo hoo*, he said, and surely I knew that when it sat thus, the devil was on his rounds inside, marking somebody for death.

I refused to listen, spent that night at the bungalow and the devil spared me, so I was able to ask the *khansama* the next morning whether *all* species of owls are messengers of the devil. He shrugged and muttered, half to himself, about ignorant city slickers who scoff at country folk, and went off in a huff.

As luck would have it, the same day we sighted a pair of spotted owlets at the edge of the forest where we stood. They are crepuscular and nocturnal birds, our commonest owls who prefer to be about human habitation, and this pair sat huddled on a secluded branch of a *nana* tree. I pointed out their presence to the *khansama* but the pair was immediately wary of being observed. One flew out in a bounding action on rounded wings. The other glared at us and began the clownish performance typical of this owlet, which amuses me no matter how often I see it, and the *khansama* soon joined me in the merriment.

This greyish brown owlet is just mynah-sized and squat, a white-spotted little fellow with a round head and large staring yellow eyes. The owlet that had stayed back bobbed his head and stared in such a way that the head travelled up a few inches and down again, and up. Now and then, his neck, invisible due to throat feathers, craned to the left and right, so the performance assumed the hilarious rhythm of a bob and crane left, then a bob and crane right, and all that time the goo goo eyes looked straight at us. Then he flew out, just as fussily as the other had done.

Late in the evening, when I told the *khansama* that the various chattering, squabbling, chuckling notes we heard came from the same or similar pairs, he acknowledged that all owls don't go *hoo hoo hoo*. Some owls may hoot but others, like our pair, chuckled or chattered, so there were obviously different kinds of owls. And he concurred that our comical spotted owlet with his clowning performance was an unlikely messenger of the devil.

Two decades later, I met the *khansama* again. He told me of a local owl that "spoke English." The *khansama* was referring to the collared scops owl that calls a soft interrogative *what* repeated monotonously every two or three seconds over long stretches of time.

The *khansama* had, in fact, turned into a nature lover, arguing with his neighbours when they tried to accuse owls, kestrels and hawks of destructiveness to poultry and game. He decried his friends' efforts to slaughter such birds of prey. He would explain to all who listened how owls devour mice and rats, those fecund pests that destroy crops and agricultural produce. He was tireless in talking of the owls' role in controlling rats.

In Cochin, those recently pressed into active service for man are the barn owls that dine almost exclusively on rats and mice. They are the size of crows, or a little bigger. They give out harsh, discordant screams and weird snoring and-hissing notes... a bad omen, yes. Bad omen for the rats.

Serenade

Firdaus Kanga

I wish you weren't 50 years older than I am so I could laugh my way into dotage with you.

A black woman's face it was, the eyes at once merry and melancholy, the orange mouth curved in a saucy smile,its colour matching the *doek* tied round her head. "I made this," you said nonchalantly, "for you. To remember me when I am dead."

I wanted to kiss your small face but of course I didn't – young men don't go around kissing old ladies. But then, I thought, am I going to wait to tell you how precious you are? Till after you are dead? And deaf and blind to my fine and futile words?

After all, you are pushing eighty. Oh dear! I think I've let out a secret. No one who sees you rushing around from bank to broker would think so. Maybe it has something to do with the way you've kept yourself with that eighteen-inch waistline and the neat doll's figure dressed in gay flare skirts and delicate blouses. So that every time my tall plump mother hugs you she lifts you six inches off the ground.

I get a little lift of happiness when I see you walk in every morning. Not that I put down whatever I'm doing to be with you. Because you have been there every morning since I was a boy. And you are forever, like my parents seem to be. So, I just smile inside and go on writing and wait for the moment when you dance into my room,a piece of beautiful white lace trailing from your hands. "Look what I've made!"

I look and look, at brilliant collages, soft brown felt puppies that feel as if they'll start squirming in my arms, a garden of embroidery where I can't see the threads for the loveliness. And I wonder, when do you get to do all this with keeping a home for your working children, managing your not inconsiderable finances, going out to see so many friends. When I'm pushing eighty will I be creating half as much out of my life?

I like your prudery, the way you shut your eyes so tight when there's a kiss on the television and purse your lips (to hide a laugh?) when someone cracks a wicked joke. And the way you dress – heavens! Queen Victoria would approve. That time you were caught out in the rain on your way to my house and my mother kept offering you her dresses. "Silly Billy!" you said in your tiny voice, "look at your size and look at mine." And you proceeded, right there in the drawing-room, to shed your vast skirt and flimsy blouse.

I sat unbelieving, open-mouthed. You looked truly charming in your knee-length pleated petticoats, sturdy cotton trimmed with layers of pink and blue lace!

Then there are your imitations – a wheedling neighbour bribing you with slices of Kraft cheese in the hope that you'll repair her twenty-year-old curtains. And your daring – the time you poured a bucket of water on a nasty druggie's head. When he protested, you said "Next time, it will be boiling water." If I know you, it must be simmering on your stove all ready.

But the best times are our bridge times when you outplay three smart young heads. The only time our table has seen a Grand Slam, it's you who did the tricks!

I love you and I wish you weren't 50 years older than I am so I could laugh my way into dotage with you.

But I know it cannot be. And when you go I hope it will be for you as it was for another old and dear friend I knew. He had a birthday party, blew out his ninety candles and died with a piece of chocolate cake in his mouth. You would like that, wouldn't you?

Children Live with Convicted Mothers in Jail

G.Kranefuss

The cost of this German scheme is three times as much as a normal prison.

Women prisoners in Lübeck, Germany, are allowed to have their children up to three years of age with them in jail. The arrangement was introduced in May last year and the results so far are said to be good.

The Schleswig-Holstein Justice Minister, Heiko Hoffmann, said six mothers were being accommodated in a separate building. Mothers and children occupy in each case a double room with kitchen and bath. They are allowed to go shopping and for walks in Lübeck itself.

Older children whose mothers are in jail generally live in homes and are collected by the fathers at weekends. One woman from Hamburg had sought parole and is allowed to go home each weekend.

Women in the prison must get up at 7 am and work four hours a day. The children are allowed to play in gardens and playgrounds in the grounds. Doctors, psychologists, social workers and ministers of religion are available.

Most of the mothers have been sentenced on theft charges.

The idea has proved itself and should be tried in other places. The three-year age limit for children was because older children were more aware of their surroundings and it was considered that the negative factors of being inside a prison outweighed the positive aspects. Incarceration could later on lead to a disturbed relationship between child and mother.

The cost of the scheme is three times as much as a normal prison – 240 marks a day instead of 80 marks.

Remission is made for good behaviour. A mother serving three years and six months could sometimes get off serving just half, or 21 months.

Reprinted from *Die Welt*, March 1987

Comment

The curse of poverty

There are many types of poverty, the most common/universal one being that of income, be it a result of indolence, injustice (distributive injustice), an economic depression or just plain bad health. Then there's the poverty of ideas arising out of a denial of education, or a refusal to learn and absorb good ideas. It's a shut mind: it was never opened, or it refused to open, or it opened only for a short while and was shut thereafter. Maybe it got 'opiated'.

Most men/women have open doors, but shut minds. Most professors of the open style of management have their office doors flung open, and their minds tightly shut! They may claim otherwise, though.

We know, only too well, of the poverty of opportunities. Again, it may be a denial of them or a case of sloth and indolence. The ambitious create opportunities, like marketmen create demands.

The good Lord hath planted something precious everywhere: oil in the Middle East, iron-ore in the Sahara, diamonds in Sierra Leone and in Botswana, sulphur in the Middle East, semi-precious stones in the Peddar Valley (Kashmir) and uranium in Jadaguda (Bihar) are only a few examples of His (recently discovered) bounty. But we men don't know how to look for it.

The worst poverty is that of upbringing: its first consequence is poverty of character. It's to be found equally among the disadvantaged and the privileged. It's the cruellest kind of poverty. Its edge is so sharp that it pulverises human brains, discountenances education – formal education and wealth and, like sin, it writes itself across your face!

Its presence among the rich and the privileged has no excuse. It enters the lowliest huts and the mightiest palaces, and strikes like a virus. It's a 'disease' of both the rich and the poor – but among the rich, when found out, it leaves the man naked, despite his heavy raiments. It's devastating in its impact, and is an unshakeable curse.

Poverty of any hue and colour is a curse, but the most abject one is that of upbringing. It's like a quicksand.

With persistent determination, one does come out of it victorious, though at times exhausted. That exhaustion is worth the attempt. It's this absence of effort which keeps succeeding generations mired in poverty. Only the poets have sung of its charms – the rich poets?

A poor man is often (though not always) muzzled. In many cases, his conscience is clean, but it simmers within: it can't afford to speak up or speak out. It's not muted within, but it's not refulgent either. It's glowless lamp!

Endeavour, self-help, courage, a faith in God, some pluck and a readiness to help a poor man are the effective answers to poverty. The first of the surest cures is self-help. The pull of poverty is gravitational; its cure has to be anti-gravitational.

B.T. DASTUR
Bombay

Bofors and Submarine kickbacks

It is imperative that all the non-Congress

(I) opposition members of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha resign en bloc, to show their disgust at the way the issues relating to the above scandals were debated recently in the respective Sabhas.

But will they? One should not be surprised if they show their utmost reluctance to resign their seats, as they would be losing their full pension benefits and other privileges on completion of five years of continuous membership.

C.A. REDDI
Madras

R.N. 1611/57 MH/BYS-285

When I Am Gone

Inez Dullas

After me
will cotton trees spill
silk thistledown
and I not be
here to see?

Will the rain
still hurtle silver
spears into brown
earth; birds sing, but
not for me?

Will the books
not read, the places
not seen, remain
for someone else
to explore?

The grace of
a curve, the ache in
beauty I fain
would keep, be mine
no more?

Entity
of all that is me
will it be lost,
and no trace left
anywhere?

Earth twirl yet,
new dawns wake? And – no! –
will blue-white frost
rime these words and
no one care?

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